



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The President's Day storm of 1979

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Image: Ann Cameron Siegal. Courtesy of the Alexandria Library Special Collections.

Today, we've become numbed to hyperbole about weather events in the mid-Atlantic region. Names like "bomb cyclone," "Snowmageddon" and "Storm of the Century" roll off the tongue to the modern reader as regular events. However, one of the worst snowstorms in Alexandria history had the modest title of the President's Day snowstorm of 1979. Perhaps the fault lies with the storm itself, which defied forecasts that assumed it would miss the area.

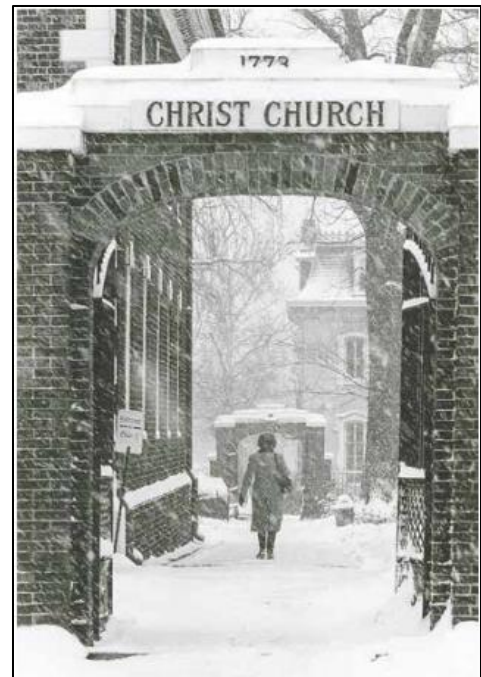
Four inches fell on the evening of Feb. 18, 1979, which was significant, but nothing to be alarmed about. The snow stopped around midnight, and forecasters predicted that only an inch or two would fall on the 19th. Instead, up to twenty inches fell the next day making it the biggest snowstorm in the area since the Knickerbocker Storm of 1922.

The storm had damaging effects beyond the time and effort needed to dig out from a storm on people's holiday. For instance, a fire swept through six townhouses on South Fairfax Street. The snow and freezing temperatures hampered the efforts of the firefighters, as the snow not only slowed the trucks' attempts to reach the blaze, but the cold froze the breathing apparatus the firefighters tried to use to navigate the smoky houses. The blaze was estimated to cost \$300,000.

One owner had only bought his townhouse four weeks earlier, and had not yet moved in. In an interview, he noted wryly that he had planned to renovate his 80-year old building, but fire wasn't his preferred method of doing so.

Elsewhere in the city, the storm stranded an ambulance carrying a cardiac patient. A second ambulance sent to rescue the first also became stranded, and hospital workers were forced to carry the patient by foot through the snow the remaining block. The patient arrived at Alexandria Hospital in satisfactory condition.

The end of the snowfall didn't mean that Alexandrian's worries were over either. Concerns about roof collapses due to the weight of the snow meant that employees at two Federal Government buildings at Cameron Station were sent home early two days after the storm. In the rush to get out of the storm's fury, many people abandoned their cars in the middle of the road, making efforts to clear the streets slow and aggravating. The city estimated that it towed more than 150 cars in the two days that followed the storm.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Partly due to the ferocity of the storm and its aftermath, meteorology is very different than it was 39 years ago. Weather tracking is much more sophisticated, and forecasters err on the side of predicting more, rather than less severity in their forecasts. Perhaps rather than scoff at the hyperbole used in storm-naming today, we can recognize the role of the plainly named President's Day storm of 1979 in how we think of weather.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.